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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001385

SIPDIS

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TAGS: OREP PREL PGOV KS
SUBJECT: CODEL BERMAN'S AUGUST 18 MEETING WITH ROK
PRESIDENT LEE MYUNG-BAK

¶1. (U) Summary: During an August 18 meeting, ROK President Lee Myung-bak stressed his satisfaction with the close cooperation between Washington and Seoul on the DPRK nuclear issue and speculated that the leadership succession in North Korea was unlikely to be smooth. The U.S. delegation emphasized the importance of the nuclear issue and expressed support for increased trade with the ROK.
End Summary.

¶2. (U) Representative Howard Berman (D-CA), Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and his delegation met with ROK President Lee Myung-bak for approximately 45 minutes on August 18. In addition to Rep. Berman, the delegation included Rep. Eni Faleomavaega (D-AS), Rep. Diane Watson (D-CA), Rep. Jack Kingston (R-GA), and Representative Ruben Hinojosa (D-TX).

¶3. (U) At the opening of the meeting, Rep. Berman expressed condolences on the passing of former ROK President Kim Dae-jung, who had died about an hour earlier. President Lee replied that Kim Dae-jung's death had deprived Korea of a towering figure of its modern history. Noting that next year would be the 60th anniversary of the Korean War, Lee expressed appreciation for passage of the Korean War Veterans Recognition Act, noting that the gesture of flying the American flag at half-staff on that day had been well received in South Korea.

North Korea

¶4. (U) The U.S.-ROK relationship was much deeper than it had been in the past, Berman observed, adding that denuclearization was at the top of our agenda. President Lee emphasized that cooperation on the nuclear issue between the United States and the ROK could not be any closer. As recently as a couple months ago, Lee said, China had been unenthusiastic about applying pressure to the DPRK, but in recent weeks Beijing had become more proactive and cooperative. As for Pyongyang, it was unclear if its recent actions in releasing the American journalists and the Korean citizen were indications that it was again ready for talks or whether it was just trying to buy time.

¶5. (U) Representative Faleomavaega endorsed President Lee's call for consistency, comprehensiveness and flexibility in dealings with North Korea. Such statements would help Kim Jong-il realize that he could no longer "play yo-yo" with the international community.

Trade

¶6. (U) Representative Kingston noted that he was excited about the opportunities the Korea-United States FTA (KORUS) would provide. He asked for President Lee's opinion on the possible leadership transition in North Korea. Lee replied that because heir-apparent Kim Jong-eun was so young, he lacked a record of accomplishments, and the transition was therefore unlikely to be smooth.

¶7. (U) Noting that the United States had lost millions of jobs during the current recession, Representative Watson assured Lee that President Obama nonetheless was determined to move forward with the KORUS FTA. She added that she remained committed to holding the next session of the U.S.-ROK parliamentary exchange, although it would probably be 2010 before it could be scheduled. Lee expressed his understanding that President Obama was preoccupied with domestic issues at the moment, and that he was confident the United States would turn to the KORUS FTA at an appropriate time. The United States was the ROK's fourth-largest trading partner and the ROK was the U.S.'s seventh largest, but the FTA was much more than just an economic agreement, and needed to be seen in a wider, strategic sense.

¶8. (U) Representative Hinojosa emphasized his appreciation for trade with Korea, which had benefited his district in Texas. Noting that his older brother had served as a paratrooper during the Korean War, Hinojosa expressed his own desire to attend next year's observance of the 60th anniversary of the war.

¶9. (U) This cable has been cleared by Chairman Berman.
TOKOLA